

CREATIVE BROODING
Acts 1:6-14
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My attention was captivated by one of those brief, pointed news programs on National Public Radio.. An interviewer was talking with people about energy conservation and discovering, with monotonous regularity, that there has been no significant alteration in the way the automobile, at least, is used. I was intrigued, in particular, by the rationale of one woman respondent, who chose to drive to work every day rather than riding the bus which stopped precisely at the door of her apartment building and would deliver her precisely to the office where she worked, less expensively than her current practice. "Why in the world," the interviewer wanted to know, "was she continuing to drive her own car, alone, every day?" She explained that she had several children and that getting them up, dressed, fed and off to school before she departed was a very chaotic experience. Her job, she went on, involved people all day long. It was demanding and hectic and very busy. When she arrived home after work, emotionally and physically drained, she was confronted with meal preparation, kitchen clean-up, homework supervision and then putting the children down for the night. It was, by her reckoning, fifteen hours per day of life at a dead run, every single minute absorbed in dealing with people. Her automobile, she said, was her only escape, her only time to be alone. She liked to roll up the windows, shut out the noise, drive to work in silence and think. She wasn't sure about the implications for the energy crisis, but she was certain that without the thirty minute period alone in the car she would be in a crisis. And for effect she added that even if she lived beside her place of employment, she would still leave early, drive around for thirty minutes before and after each working day.

The woman, I concluded, had a point. Coincidentally, I was listening to that interview while driving to a Presbytery Council meeting in Midway, a small and remote town some thirty miles south of here, an expedition I didn't need or like. That particular day had begun, for me, on the run. On the way downtown I made a quick stop at a drug store in the process of opening. The proprietor, a good friend, observed that I had half-run into the store and was obviously impatient to keep moving. With great wisdom he said, "You aren't on commission are you?" We both laughed. As the day got tighter, and items on the list were transferred to the next day's list, and as the time approached to drive south I was frustrated, harried and almost angry. Then I heard the woman talk about the solitude of her automobile. I turned the radio off, reduced speed to the legal limit and slowly began to enjoy myself. When I arrived in Midway, a world away from Broad and Garfield, I walked around a bit, and heard something I hadn't heard for a very long time - silence. It is quiet in Midway. At four in the afternoon there is no sound at all. Now I love life in the city, but I realized that day and night, city people live with a persistent sound level: that, literally, from one year to the next, I don't listen to the silence. I realized, also, that I was late for the meeting.

The American way of life, the way of life we love and enjoy and propel by our own physical and emotional energies, is the complete antithesis of the meditative, prayerful life of solitude. The life we live is, in many ways, a conspiracy against silence. We value productivity, industry, activity. "Idle hands are the devil's workshop" children used to be warned, and American adults demonstrate that they believe that homegrown proverb with deep conviction. We live on the run: we work hard, we play hard and one of the abiding ironies about us is that we work hard at playing hard so that the difference between the two becomes negligible. We are so obsessed with busy activity that we have, in one generation, lost something very precious from our life - the idea of Sabbath. It has disappeared, unmourned, from the American psyche. We have applauded the demise of blue laws and booked Sunday

as solidly as any other day, and destroyed a wisdom as old as history itself; namely, that one day out of seven, human beings need to cease and desist. The noise of manufacturing is part of life: the traffic at Port Columbus continues seven days a week. We have no control over those. But we are so enamored with noise that we frantically fill up every silent space. Tests have demonstrated that an evening at a rock concert amounts medically to an "insult to the ear"; muzak accompanies our shopping, driving, grieving and our waiting to see the dentist. Several centuries ago the philosopher Pascal said something I think should be emblazoned across the top of every television set. He said, "All the evils of life have fallen upon us because men will not sit alone quietly in a room."

Sadly, Western Christianity has followed suit and rather enthusiastically reflected, instead of correcting, our culture on the subject. There is a rich tradition in Christianity of meditation, prayer and the disciplined cultivation of private spirituality. But it isn't prominent, or even existent in our religious structures. It is ignored in popular theology. We have forgotten how to meditate, we don't pray very much and the idea that religion requires some listening for God is entirely alien to us. The Quakers hold out for silence, but the overwhelming majority of Protestants would regard a ten minute period in the middle of worship for prayer and meditation as a gross waste of time and terribly uncomfortable. It is no coincidence and certainly no mystery, therefore, that American Christianity is being invaded from the East. Zen, Transcendental Meditation and other esoteric religious movements are very hot items at the moment. A fad, to be sure, but also somewhere in the phenomenon we ought to perceive a basic human need that our practice of religion simply is not meeting.

Out text this morning is an unremarkable sequence that begins sometime after the resurrection of Jesus Christ and before Pentecost. In fact, we are inclined to gloss over "in between" material like this in order to focus on major events. Pentecost, which the Church will celebrate next Sunday, is a major event. On that occasion the disciples of Jesus became ambassadors for Christ, began to preach the Gospel openly, and Christianity was born. It is, in all of history, one of the most creative single days: nothing has ever been the same for humanity since Pentecost. It was also a busy and noisy affair: there were great crowds: people were talking in different languages: the disciples had to shout in order to be heard: observers thought they were drunk and three thousand individuals were baptized. It was dynamic and alive and exciting. But what I want to suggest this morning is that the event called Pentecost, the very birth process of the Church, was dependent upon a period of empty waiting. In the text the friends of Jesus had returned from an experience we call the Ascension. It was the last time they sensed the physical presence of the risen Christ. They returned to the room where they had been hiding. They returned and did nothing. They waited. They submitted to what I have termed Creative Brooding. The result of that experience, I am suggesting, was Pentecost.

I am convinced that it is a matter of some importance to recover what we have lost, and I invite you to think with me about the potentialities of silence, solitude, aloneness: the creative potential of brooding.

The first dimension is personal. The avoidance of solitude makes us strangers to ourselves. We are so involved with communicating, relating, acting, doing, that we lose touch with our own personhood. The immediate casualty is a terrible waste of personal capacity for thinking, deciding, creating, that we have within ourselves. Almost automatically we turn to others for advice or at least confirmation that our own concepts and feelings are all right. In the process we are failing to nurture and sharpen the resources we already have.

In Rollo May's book on creativity, The Courage to Create, the author discusses the mysterious experience that we all have had on occasion. We struggle with a problem over a long period of time: the harder we work, the more illusive the resolution seems. And then suddenly, while we are doing something else, out of the blue, the answer comes. He writes: "If we are too rigid...we will never let ourselves be aware of the knowledge that exists on another level within us. But the insight cannot be born until the conscious tension is relaxed." (p.66).

I have always been delighted with Albert Einstein's confession that his best ideas came to him while he was shaving. I was even happier to discover an addendum to that vignette. One time Einstein asked a Princeton professor why it happened that way. The professor answered, "...the mind needs the relaxation of inner controls...to be freed in reverie or day dreaming - for the unaccustomed ideas to emerge." (Ibid, p.67).

The New Testament is helpful here. Jesus is an eloquent model for the idea. His life, apparently, was a rhythmic movement between involvement with people and private retreat. The narrative of active teaching and healing is punctuated by periods of solitude during which He went off by Himself, or up onto a mountain to pray. The creativity of Jesus Himself, not to mention the strength and courage to go on, depended on the periods of creative brooding.

Artists, authors - those who know and use their creative capacities more than the rest of us, understand the necessity of quiet meditation. One writer practiced a routine of two hours at his desk, followed by two hours pitching quoits. And most artistically inclined people testify that when it happens - when the idea, the concept, the shape emerges from somewhere deep inside, released as it were from that untapped reservoir of creativity, it is a religious experience. (Ibid, p.75).

Now, most of us are not artists, authors or poets, in the classic sense. But everyone of us must live life in a variety of roles. Everyone of us can live superficially or deeply: we can live on the basis of what others demand, or creatively, out of the depths of the resources God has given. I am suggesting that time and space for quiet creative brooding is necessary if we are to discover the resources we already have: that solitude is the key to creative living.

The second dimension is relational. Dutch theologian Henri Nouwen writes, "Love consists in this, that two solitudes protect and border and salute each other." (Reaching Out, p.31). I hate to keep picking on Eric Segal for "love means never having to say you're sorry", but it occurred to me that Nouwen is far closer to truth: that love means, sometimes, many times, not having to say anything. One of the practical concerns that confronts every one of us at some time or another is what to say to someone you care about when that person is in crisis. Every one of us knows the anxiety of going to a funeral home, trying to compose a speech in the car, and then face to face with the grieving person stumbling through a series of inane remarks, or pulling out the old standards. And all the while, physical, silent presence is really all that is required. That person knows you care. An embrace, without exegesis, will go further in communicating love and God's healing presence, than the fanciest of speeches. Sometimes deep and profound joy requires only silent sharing. In fact, sometimes talking is destructive. I found a perfectly delightful and wry poem this week that was new to me. Two lovers are together in a wooded glen: the narrator describes the magic of the experience in lush and romantic images - "The three that I loved, together grew One, in the hour of knowing, night and the woods and you." But then the woman starts to talk -

"...Suddenly
There was an uproar in my woods...
crashing and laughing...
...a voice profaning the solitudes.

The spell was broken the key denied me.
And at length your flat, clear voice beside me
Mouthed cheerful clear flat platitudes.

You came and quaked beside me in the wood...
You said, 'The view from here is very good!'
You said, 'It's nice to be alone a bit!'
You said, 'The sunset's pretty, isn't it?'

By God! I wish - I wish that you were dead."

(The Collected Poems of Rupert Brooke - in Leslie
Weatherhead, The Significance of Silence, p.24-5).

There is room for solitude, creative brooding, in authentic relationships.

The third dimension is spiritual, the one we have lost most completely. As model, Jesus demonstrated that an awareness of God, a relationship with God, requires time and space for solitude. One of the most familiar Old Testament stories is about Elijah the prophet, running from a furious Jezebel, hiding in a cave; storm and earthquake descend and afterward, not in the wind and fire, but in the silence, God speaks in the still, small voice of calm.

Simone Weil, French author, once wrote, "Waiting patiently in expectation is the foundation of the spiritual life." (See Nouwen, op.cit. p.91). I know of no author or theologian who exhibits any kind of spiritual sensitivity who does not advise that an awareness of God depends entirely on a disciplined pattern of meditation and listening. Henri Nouwen writes: "...we need quiet time in the presence of God. Although we want to make all our time, time for God, we will not succeed if we do not reserve a minute, an hour, a morning, a day...or whatever period of time for God and Him alone. (op.cit. p.97).

God comes in the silence. The human spirit is awakened to God when it reaches into its own depths. Somewhere it is written that we are unable to spend more than a few minutes in silence without thinking about God. I have found that to be true. And I believe that this inexorable turning to God, in our solitude, is simply the way we perceive and experience His coming to us. God takes the initiative: in the deepest, most profound sense, God is the active partner even when we are doing the thinking, or speaking or praying.

But sometimes in silence we confront what we perceive as the absence of God. We have heard no special voice, no thundering revelation, we have had no emotional upheaval. In silence we confront God's silence. May I suggest that this experience, too, is of God? That God is experienced even in our longing for Him, our awareness of His silence and absence?

Jack Kerouac has a passage somewhere in one of his novels in which a character is returning to San Francisco after a glorious period alone in a mountain cabin. As the man is leaving he feels the need to pray. Traditional prayer language isn't adequate. He isn't comfortable with it. He kneels on one knee in silence and from his heart comes an honest prayer, that most authentic human response to the awesome presence of the Almighty in the quiet spaces of life, "I love you, God. God, I have fallen in love with you."

Our faith is that Jesus Christ calls us into active discipleship in the world. Following Him is public, political, noisy and very worldly business. He also calls us away from that on occasion, to be alone with ourselves and with God...to a quiet brooding that is always creative, a solitude in which God can find access to our spirits, a pregnant silence which will call out of us, too, that honest, most profound affirmation, "Oh God, I have fallen in love with you."

Amen.

O God of mystery; forgive us if we treat the ideas too casually. Give us moments of silence: help us to hear Your voice. In the world about us, give us faith to see Your activity, Your healing and sustaining love. And our Father, out of occasional solitude, give us words and deeds to affirm our love for You. Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.